

## **“The Power of Lunch,” and Other Strategies for Building Social Capital at Work**

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In their study of different Project Management practices across the globe, Frank Anbari and his collaborators noted that PMs in the US, UK, and Australia ranked as the most “individualistic” in their attitudes towards work, as opposed to those with more “collectivist” attitudes (“Managing Cross Cultural Differences in Projects,” 2009). Project Managers in these countries tend to define “success” in terms of their own success in their professions and are more likely to disregard the success (or failure) of other members on their project team. Unlike those with a more “collectivist” attitude, the “individualists” may not feel great loyalty to their team or other co-workers.

Our “individualist” tendencies here in the US have their advantages - for example, this approach is likely more time-efficient than a strongly “collectivist” one, which might strive for group consensus on every decision. Taken to the extreme, though, an individualist approach to Project Management has drawbacks. Interpersonal relationships - between co-workers, supervisors, and stakeholders - play a role in every project; the only difference is that some Project Management practices take them into account productively, while others try to ignore their existence. In this article, we’ll review some of the ways to incorporate a consideration of “social capital” into your everyday PM practices in order to build a more successful project team.

You may have heard of the idea of “social capital” before. This is your network of connections that helps shape the kind and number of different opportunities you have in your life. The idea of “social capital” is fairly new - it has only come into popular use since the publication of Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam’s book, *Bowling Alone* (2000). In this book, Putnam tracks Americans’ involvement in different social groups and finds a consistent decline in in-person interactions - “social capital” - since the 1950s.

We can see this trend in our own workplace environments. Many of us spend the whole day in front of our computers, and will interact with co-workers only over WebEx or email - even if we’re working on a project team. To really build social capital, though, you need to get out of your cubicle and talk to people face-to-face. Here are some steps you can take to build your “social capital” at work that will not just increase your own network and field of opportunities, but will improve the performance of your project team:

1. **The Power of Lunch:** Instead of eating lunch alone at your workstation, where you run the risk of spilling soup all over your keyboard as you attempt to “multitask,” go out to lunch with your co-workers, supervisors, or stakeholders. Take this opportunity to develop rapport with these people and get a better sense of their communication styles. The kinds of conversations you’ll have at lunch will likely show you a new side of the people you work with, which you might not get to see if you only communicate with them over email or conference call.
2. **Foster a Culture of Reciprocity:** A great way to get more “buy-in” from the other people on your project team, or co-workers whose help you might need, is to show them what’s in it for them. Rather than just saying, “I need you to do X,” begin your interaction by briefly explaining your project and why this person could benefit from helping you. You’ll also need to find a balance of offering help to others and asking for it in order to develop lasting and positive working relationships with others.
3. **Be Proactive:** Don’t just interact with the co-workers and supervisors that your job requires you to interact with - get out there and meet other people in your industry! If you’re a Project Manager, joining your local PMI chapter is a great way to expand your network of connections and develop your professional skills.

These are just a few ideas to help you grow your “social capital” at work, even if you’re not currently in need of “networking” opportunities to look for a new job. The benefits of social capital go beyond just helping you land a position; social capital is also a key part of developing a successful project teams built on mutually beneficial working relationships among co-workers. A few simple actions like taking your team out to lunch can have a huge impact on your team’s ability to work together effectively.

**About the Author:**



Michelle LaBrosse, PMP, is an entrepreneurial powerhouse with a penchant for making success easy, fun, and fast. She is the founder of [Cheetah Learning](#), the author of the Cheetah Success Series, and a prolific [blogger](#) whose mission is to bring Project Management to the masses.

Cheetah Learning is a virtual company with 100 employees, contractors, and licensees worldwide. To date, more than 50,000 people have become “Cheetahs” using Cheetah Learning’s innovative Project Management and accelerated learning techniques.

Michelle also developed the [Cheetah Certified Project Manager \(CCPM\)](#) program based on Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality profiling to help students master how to use their unique strengths for learning, doing projects, and negotiating. CCPM graduates are able to choose the right projects and complete those projects “cheetah fast” based on their personality. They also learn how to leverage others’ strengths which significantly improves overall project team performance. When an employer has a cadre of CCPMs on staff, they achieve whatever they set out to achieve in record time. This is why over 90% of Cheetah's clients experience an increase in both profitability and revenue within the first year of retaining Cheetah Learning for their Project Management training needs.

Honored by the Project Management Institute (PMI®), Cheetah Learning was named Professional Development Provider of the Year at the 2008 PMI® Global Congress. A dynamic keynote speaker and industry thought leader, Michelle is recognized by PMI as one of the 25 Most Influential Women in Project Management in the world.